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DEPT FOR DS/IP/WHA, DS/DSS/ITA, DS/DSS/OSAC, CA/OCS, WHA/CEN - ROIS
BEAL

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [ASEC](#) [AMGT](#) [BH](#)

SUBJECT: STRONG MS-13 PRESENCE IN WESTERN BELIZE

REF: (A) BELMOPAN 643; (B) BELMOPAN 609; (C) 05 BELIZE 657;
(D) 06 BELIZE 579; (E) BELMOPAN 118

1. (SBU) Recent reports from Belize of the Mara Salvatrucha gang (MS-13) presence in Belize (REFTELS A, B) indicated a stronger base of operations than previously known. Reports from a Confidential Source (CS) (REFTEL A) led RSO to independently determine MS-13 strength in the Cayo District of western Belize. Interviews and observation show not only MS-13 but MS-18 are widespread in that area, with an estimated 400 actual gang members (not just hangers-on).

2. (SBU) The description of a CS of an MS-13 presence strong enough to cause emulation by school children by drawing MS-13 "tattoos" caused concern. On October 30, 2007, RSO and FSNI traveled to the Cayo District. Meeting with a high school vice principal, RSO received confirmation of the CS reports. MS-18, an offshoot of MS-13 had graffiti at the school. Tattooed gang members were seen frequently in the area, and the violence was well known. The vice principal recommended speaking with a specific teacher who, she said, was more familiar with the problem.

3. (SBU) The teacher, a former police officer, joined the meeting, and described a grave situation. He and the vice principal related the story of a student recently killed by an MS-13 gang member: he had been hit over the head with a bottle, went home and died that night. The gang member - who had the gang sign tattooed on his forehead -- was identified to police. Police took no action. After some time, the incident was further reported to an Assistant Commissioner, who promised to look into it. The teacher and principal report there has still been no response by police.

4. (SBU) The teacher estimated 400 hard-core gang members in the western part of Cayo. He described graffiti immediately outside his residence and at the central park (RSO confirmed this). With an estimated population of 40,000 in the entire district, such a number of MS-13 and MS-18 operating without police interference is cause for concern.

5. (SBU) On 20 October, 2007, the GSO and POL Officers were in San Ignacio, the capital of Cayo. While at the market, they observed two Hispanic males going from booth to booth. They describe the two simply receiving money from each booth operator: no conversation, no papers or merchandise, simply money being given by each vendor. While this may be perfectly innocent, the appearance of extortion cannot be discounted, especially in light of the news related to the MS gangs.

6. (SBU) The inability of police in Belize to control the existing high crime level is already a problem. Very low funding allows almost no training, little equipment, almost no vehicles, etc. When tracking U.S. fugitives, cars must often be rented for the police to use; occasionally when a police vehicle is available, RSO must provide fuel. RSO feared the level of violence and organization of

MS-13 would be beyond the ability of the police department to handle. Several recent press stories have focused on arrests and deportations of MS-13 members or sympathizers. Whether these efforts will be enough to slow or stop the gangs' growth in Belize is not clear.

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DIETER